

He said, She Said & Power

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CM310: Communication and Conflict

After assessing the case study, "He said, She Said", it is obvious that the case study participants are entangled in a power struggle; though each of their attitudes, demeanors, and dispositions are quite different. The case study leads us through a common situation about a divorced mother, Marie, who has a son, Lenny, from a previous marriage. Marie has moved on beyond the divorce and has established a new relationship with Mike, her fiancé. Mike has now moved into the house and has been observing how unruly Lenny has been acting; and that is the catalyst of the power struggle. Mike does not like the way Marie punishes Lenny. Mike thinks Marie's punishments are too lightweight or not even punishments at all. Marie believes Lenny is basically a good kid, and perhaps does not deserve harsh punishments at all. So, Marie uses her motherly powers to protect Lenny (even from Mike). Lenny, who has been skimping on his chores, breaking curfew, persuading his mother to not enforce punishments, is basically doing whatever he wants. But why is Lenny doing this? At first take, it looks as if Lenny is doing this because he is engaged in a power struggle with Mike; and Lenny is regularly sending a clear message to Mike about who has the real power. Mike, at first, avoids dealing with the disobedient teenager. But eventually, Mike has to step in to assert some control over Lenny, and at the same time try to show Marie that he has the capacity to act as head of household. Mike wants to be the head of household and to be able to control Lenny's poor behavior. Marie wants to protect Lenny at all costs. And Lenny, well Lenny wants Mike out of the house, but if cannot have that, doing whatever he wants will suffice. This is just our initial assessment of what is going on in the household. Now let us delve deeper into some key facts, detail the true source of the conflict, and review possible solutions. (Davis)

When we look at the nature of the power struggle between our housemates, it is easy to take sides, and get caught up in the drama of the conflict. But we should examine the facts, stay unbiased, and consider all the facts objectively. Using our TRIP Goals (Wilmot & Hocker pg. 71) we can assess what each of our housemates goals are. For example, it is quite problematic that our housemates' *topic goals*

are all different. Mike wants to be head of household. Lenny wants to do whatever he wants. Marie wants to be the only one who can punish Lenny. As we look at the case study (and staying impartial), we realize that all three of our case study participants are to blame for a power conflict that is beginning to spiral out of control. Yes, Marie is a mother. Yes, Lenny is her son. But both of them now have a new person to integrate into their home and into their life; and that is Mike. The initial set of self-serving *identity goals* should be assessed by the new family and they should talk about *relational goals* (Wilmot & Hocker pg. 71). Instead of Marie, Mike and Lenny being worried about maintaining self-image and trying to throw their weight around (so to speak), they should share their expectations with one another in a family meeting. Even though Marie, Mike and Lenny are all engaged in this domestic power struggle, there are ways for each of them to win; and that is through changing their topic goal from what is good only for them, to what is good for the family as a whole. A constructive quote from our text is, "*Conflict serves the function of bringing problems to the table*" (Wilmot & Hocker pg. 43). This is exactly what this family needs, the problems on the table so they can all discuss them in an open manner.

The apparent antagonist of the case study is Lenny. However, if we are to remain objective, we need to delve further into the psychology of why Lenny is acting out. There has been a major power shift in the home as Mike moves in and begins assuming head of household. Also, Lenny *is actually* a child of divorce; as hard as divorce can be for adults, it can be exponentially more difficult for a child. And let us not overlook the fact that Lenny is a teenager; meaning, teenage years are not always the easiest. So not only is Lenny managing teenager tendencies, dealing with the fallout between his mother and father, he also has to come to terms with his mother establishing a new relationship. Lenny's poor behavior and his ensued power struggle with Mike can be attributed to multiple factors. Many of these variables are beyond Lenny's control, and that is why he is acting out. At one point Lenny is breaking curfew and is being punished and his reaction is, "WHAT?" screamed Lenny, "that is so unfair!" (Davis, p. 1). Lenny most likely has a good idea of why he is being punished, but still he argues the point. Even though Lenny may appear to be to be the source of the conflict, Marie and Mike are all equal participants in this power struggle.

What does this family need? It needs solutions based upon goals that work for the household. So what are the current group goals of our three housemates? It is not surprising that there are no group goals. Mike, Marie, and Lenny are all trying to achieve their individual goals. Mike's goal is to be head of household. Lenny's goal is to show Mike he does not necessarily have any power over Lenny. Marie's goal is to control the discipline of her son, Lenny. So how do we bring this family together and transcend the conflict from fighting to harmony? First, we change their topic goal, and then we work on expectations. We start by bringing the family to an open family session, where the tone of the conflict gets change from individual conflict to what is best for the family. Marie, Mike and Lenny must then tell one another what their concerns are, what their problems are, and what they expect of one another. They each listen; they each must remember what the new topic goal is. Marie must come to terms with having a man in the house and let him assume head of household. Mike must understand Marie's motherly nature, and not take the protection of Lenny so negatively. Lenny must realize he is still a teenager, and should show the adults in the house respect. By bringing the family together for meeting, shedding light on what their group goal should be, and allowing each of them to voice their concerns, Marie, Mike and Lenny are well on their way to a harmonious household (which should have been their goal the whole time). If Marie, Mike and Lenny are able to collaborate on a common goal that benefits each of them in some way, they can effectively overcome the power struggle, resolve the conflict, and move on to a harmonious, smooth running household.

Group goals should allow for equal and harmonious solutions for each person. And if Mike, Marie, and Lenny collaborate on a group goal, everyone wins. But what if they cannot reach an initial collaboration? What happens then? Our case study does end quite tragically with,

"Look," Marie jumped in, "I know how to handle my own son, so please don't interfere." She began washing to coffee cups, the clattering almost deafening.

"Interfere?" Mike screamed. "I thought we were a family and I had some say in the matter." "You do, Mike, you do. It's just that..." "Forget it," Mike

**interrupted. "I don't know what you want anymore. I need to go to work,"
and he stormed out the back door." (Davis, p. 3)**

This is exactly what we are trying to prevent; we do not want the conflict to become so emotional that the parties involved have to walk out. Another great quote from our text is, "*Conflict can function to clear out resentments and help people understand each other*" (Wilmot & Hocker pg. 43). Marie, Mike and Lenny need to clear out the resentment. The resentment each of them has is causing them to exhibit negative emotions, and these emotions are throwing them into a power struggle. What other solutions exists if they cannot collaborate? Marie, Mike and Lenny may need an *intervention* (Wilmot & Hocker pg. 271). They could seek out a family counselor. A third party could assist the family in ways that they cannot help themselves. People that are involved in conflicts tend to gravitate towards information that supports their perspective in the conflict. A third party would offer unbiased and objective advice. A third party, like a family counselor, would listen to Marie, Mike and Lenny, and then help them transcend the conflict to something that works for everyone.

In the end, whatever happens to Marie, Mike and Lenny, it is ultimately their responsibility to seek out a peaceful, harmoniously solution that works for the family as a whole. Even though the conflict is a power struggle between Marie, Mike and Lenny, it is not anything that cannot be resolved by establishing a common goal, voicing their expectations in an open and honest way, and transcending the conflict into a scenario where everyone wins. They must collaborate to maintain the integrity of the household.

References:

Wilmot W.W. and Hocker, J.L. (2011) *Interpersonal Conflict*, 8th Ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Davis, Deborah (n.d.). "He said, She Said..." Retrieved on 05/20/2012, from <http://kucourses.com>.

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